

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

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Histrionic Capacity of Grey Parrots.

THE capacity of the grey parrot for repeating words and sentences of human language and for imitating the cries and sounds made by other animals, both beasts and birds, is well known. The remarkable aptitude which this parrot shows for "saying the right thing at the right time" is also, I believe, well known to those who have been familiar with intelligent specimens of the bird. But I was not, until recently, aware that the bird can be not only an excellent mimic but also a good actor; and it is possible that some of your readers may be able to give other instances of what I now propose, with your permission, to relate.

My daughter had a very clever young grey parrot, which, unfortunately, died on the first of this month, after a severe illness of three weeks' duration. He was brought to my daughter straight from the nest in Africa, and had he lived another month would have been about two years old. He was a singularly clever bird, and of a charming disposition to his friends, though very shy and inclined to be hostile to strangers. He was an exceptionally good talker for his age, and showed remarkable intelligence in fitting his sayings to the occasion. He was very fond both of fruit and sugar, but I never knew him ask for sugar at dinner or for apple at breakfast. For nuts, which were kept in a cupboard in the room, he would ask at any time; and in many similar ways he showed a vivid association between the words and the things represented by them.

But the remarkable, and to me novel, power which he displayed at so young an age was that of acting. He played with a bit of wood exactly as a clever little girl plays with her doll. For example, he would take the wood in his claw and would say to it, imitating the voice and gestures of my daughter or of one of the servants, "What! are you going to bite me? How dare you? I will take the stick to you!" Then he would shake his head at the wood and say, "I am ashamed of you! Whom did you bite? Go on your perch!" Then he would take the wood to the bottom of his cage, and putting it down on the floor would hit it with his claw several times, saying, "Naughty! I'll cover you up, I will!" Then he would step back from it one or two paces, put his head on one side and say, as he looked at it, "Are you good now?"

No attempt was ever made, deliberately, to teach him this or any other of his histrionic performances. He picked them up spontaneously from his own observation and memory.

It would interest me much to know whether this capacity for acting is often found in grey parrots. D. R. FEARON.

The Athenæum, Pall Mall, S.W.

Use of the Arms in Locomotion.

I CANNOT help feeling a special interest in the two letters appearing at pages 80 and 102 of NATURE. Let anyone stand on a table and jump down, he will find that he throws up the arms to lighten the fall. Let him go quickly up or down stairs and see what use he will then make of his arms.

When I was a small boy, brought up in the country, the motions of the body indicated in these letters were natural ones to me and my brothers and sister. But as I got older I went to school, and at twelve years of age had to join a cadet corps.

Then were the natural movements drilled out of me; the body had always to be square to the front, the arms motionless by the sides. We were exercised on the flat, and one regulation quick step was practised, having one length of pace, one of time and one in stiffness.

At seventeen I went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, where the same system was continued, but varied, I was thankful to find, by an excellent gymnastic training.

At eighteen I became an officer and remained as such for ten years, when I retired. During the last four or five years of my service I was adjutant of my regiment and taught the system I have described. The British Army was indeed smart, it was beautiful to look at, we rejoiced in it, we were proud of ourselves.

Since my retirement in 1878 soldiers are allowed to swing the arms when marching and it is said that since the war in South

Africa there are to be many real reforms. I shall believe in them when I see them.

At fifty-two years of age I find that in my daily walks or mountain excursions, when I am walking (1) on the flat, (2) uphill, or (3) downhill, then (1) the length of pace, (2) the time of each pace and (3) the attitude and movements of the whole body must differ in each case, so as to ensure the best work with the least possible fatigue, the least risk of falling, overstrain or other mishap. There is an art in the performance of what may seem to some the simplest actions of our lives, and it is surprising what a man can do in climbing the hillside if he knows the right way to set about it.

The British soldier is not properly taught how to march, and the war has abundantly shown that most of his drill is worse than useless.

In building a house it is usual to commence with a good foundation and finish with the roof. But what I read in the newspapers on *officially proposed* Army reform is indeed painful to me. I am a practical man and can assure you that if the British taxpayer is going to be satisfied with the creation of Army boards and Army corps, and a far too large and costly staff—the roof of the Army—and does not see to a solid foundation in a greatly improved training of the individual soldier by the *officers immediately over him*—i.e. company officers, who should be properly paid for their work—and not adjutants and sergeant-majors, he might just as well throw the millions he will be asked to expend into the Atlantic Ocean.

This is not usually the place for the discussion of Army matters, and I must stop here, hoping you will consider that what I have said fairly arises from the lead that has been given me.

But I hope I may urge in conclusion that the arms should be worked habitually by all people, soldiers and civilians, men and women. Medical men now recognise that in these days of civilisation the leisured classes use the lower limbs far more than the upper ones and that the true way to cure many cases of weak heart, lungs or digestion is to daily exercise the muscles of the arms, shoulders and chest, the healthy action thus set up strengthening the internal organs of the body. Serious cases of nervous disorder and brain trouble can often be successfully combated with a judicious exercise of the arms under skilled advice.

The gist of the whole matter is this. Our lives have become too fictitious; we should go to the teachings of *Nature* and endeavour to be *natural*. GILES A. DAUBENY.

Las Colondalles, Montreux, Switzerland, December 8.

The Value of the Horns in Bighorn Wild Sheep as Ear-trumpets.

IN the case of spiral-horned *domestic* sheep, as observed chiefly in the Alps, the ear is as large as is usual in sheep, and the horn (which grows homonymously, *i.e.* the right horn has a right spiral direction and the left a left) curls round the ear in such a fashion that the ear caged in the open spiral is confined to certain limits by the curves of the horn and lies in the long axis of the open spiral of the horn, from which it only now and then escapes by accident.

An extraordinary difference is seen in the wild sheep, especially to be noted in *Ovis nivicola* (for a figure and description *vide* p. 214, vol. i., Guillemand's "Voyage of the *Marchesa*"). The horns in this creature are enormous, but the ear is remarkably short, though still situated exactly in the axis of the spiral and in such a fashion that the ear appears to be at the apex of a hollow cone formed by the great spiral horn. A similar condition and relation of ear to horn is found in *Ovis montana*, the Siberian argali, and others. The form of the horn and the position of the ear enables the wild sheep to determine the direction of sounds when there is a mist or fog, the horn acting like an Admiralty megaphone when used as an ear-trumpet, or like the topophone (a double ear-trumpet, the bells of which open opposite ways) used for a fog-bound ship on British-American vessels to determine the direction of sound signals.

By taking a horn off the skull the listening ear, if properly placed, can distinguish the tick of a watch in one position best in the axis of the coil, and thus test the value of the horn for determining the direction of sounds—though no evidence of improved hearing for distance could be discovered by any such simple experiment. The functions suggested would be especially of advantage to wild sheep when feeding on mountains in mist and fog in making them more wary and difficult of approach.

Cambridge, December 7.

GEORGE WHERRY.